

◆ 4

Nation, Violence, Memory: Interrupting the Foundational Discourse in *Sab*

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A Martina es a quien he oído, repetidas veces, referir misteriosamente e interrumpiéndose por momentos con exclamación de dolor y pronósticos siniestros de venganza divina la muerte horrible y bárbara que, según ella, dieron los españoles al cacique Camagüey, señor de esta provincia; y del cual pretende descender nuestra pobre Martina. . . .

En sus momentos de exaltación, señor, he oído gritar a la vieja india. La tierra que fue regada con sangre una vez lo será aún otra: los descendientes de los opresores serán oprimidos, y los hombres negros serán los terribles vengadores de los hombres cobrizos. (Gómez de Avellaneda 167–168)¹

(It is Martina who I have heard, many times, mysteriously recount and interrupting herself by moments of painful exclamation and sinister predictions of divine vengeance the horrible and savage death that, according to her, the Spanish gave to chief Camagüey, ruler of this province; and from whom our poor Martina claims to descend. . . .

In her moments of exaltation, Sir, I have heard the old Indian woman cry out. The earth that was once washed over with blood will shall once again be so: the descendants of the oppressors shall be oppressed, and the black man shall be the dreaded avenger of the red man.)

A storyteller of past violence and predictor of ominous futures, presumed legatee of Taíno ancestry, and adoptive mother to the narrative's slave protagonist, Martina is one of the most enigmatic yet least studied characters in Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's foundational novel, *Sab*. This essay aims to propose possible alternative meanings of the novel through a close reading of the figure of the indigenous mother, a marginal figure who has remained relatively silenced in existing scholarship. In particular, I will highlight Martina's narrative function, not so much as a kind of alter ego to the authorial subject, but more precisely as a force of interruption ("interrumpiéndose por momentos con exclamación de dolor y pronósticos siniestros de venganza divina" (167) [interrupting herself by moments of painful exclamation and sinister predictions of divine vengeance]), a voice dissonant to what has become a dominant hermeneutic model applied to the novel. That model, based on the very important work of Doris Sommer, highlights the primacy of the allegory and of the Romance structure as principal modes for interpreting the national political project imagined in *Sab*.² Without denying the validity of these readings, I wish to underscore how Martina's character reveals the failure of the desire for national harmonization, a desire couched in the allegorical structure of the Romance. Martina makes this failed desire explicit in the narrative by inscribing, rather loudly (to the point of querulous, even agonizing repetition), the violence rooted in the nation's very founding. Martina's voice, figuratively speaking, is *other* to the allegory's ecumenical drive,³ a voice of dissent before the appeal to forget the foundational violence of Cuban history: the violence of the Conquest and the continuity of its brutality under the system of slavery. It is Martina who tells that hi/story.

Echoing Sommer, Kelly Comfort analyzes the protagonist Sab as a multiracial symbol of this idealized, national consolidation, but recognizes the symbolic role of the indigenous mother in the construction of a future Cuban nation insufficiently projected by the novel. Such an imagined future is engendered in the moment when Martina symbolically adopts Sab as her son, substituting his absent African mother "with the vestiges of an original, pre-colonial Cuban mother. When Martina . . . adopt[s] Sab as her son, Gómez de Avellaneda continues her sketch of an independent and protonational Cuba" (182). Giving credence to what Martina says about herself (i.e. that she is indeed of indigenous descent, an identity over which the novel casts substantial doubt), Comfort interprets her character as an allegorically stabilizing force in that she completes the Indian, Spanish, African trilogy in Sab's genealogy. For Comfort, the novel's uniting of Sab and Martina symbolizes a more perfect and harmonious national unity: "this merger of the 'native' mother with the hybrid son introduces the possibility for a new Cuban protonational subject" (182). The novel's political project, according to Comfort, is one that promotes this "protonationalism."

Although the mulatto slave's desire for the Creole woman can indeed allegorize a certain notion of national solidarity—and while Martina's performed adoption of Sab can be read as a complex image of racially harmonious, historic synthesis—these readings ignore other important dimensions of her character: namely that Martina's voice forcefully interrupts the allegorical fantasies that, according to Sommer and Comfort, are posed by the novel. Martina destabilizes the novelized foundations of the future nation by *not* forgetting the violence committed in the process of Cuba's national formation. In contrast, she remembers these violent origins by assuming them as elements constitutive to her character. Rather than forming part of a protonational reconciliation and consolidation, Martina's role is one that disrupts the stability of the notion of "independence and nationhood" highlighted by Comfort (180) and the "oportunidad para la consolidación [nacional]" ("C'est Moi" 36) (opportunity for [national] consolidation) identified by Sommer. This is not to suggest that reading *Sab* as a national allegory is an untenable approach, but rather that the novel allows for other, less idyllic, interpretive modes. The allegorical framework in *Sab* is undermined by a reluctance to forget; colonial violence is neither forgotten nor are the scars engraved by its painful history ever fully erased. Martina, amplified in the voices of the other characters, exposes these scars and, as we shall see, thereby serves to echo the system of slavery constructed in the novel.

Who is Martina, and what is her function in the novel? Above all she is a racially illegible figure, characterized as much by her claimed indigenous ancestry as she is by the uncertainty surrounding that ancestry. When presenting her to the Creole family of the female protagonist Carlota, Sab confirms that the locals (the *Cubiteros*) do not doubt that she truly is *indígena* (indigenous) because of "su grande experiencia, sus conocimientos en medicina de los que sacan tanta utilidad, y el placer que gozan oyéndola referir sus sempiternos cuentos de vampiros y aparecidos" (167) (her great experience, her knowledge of the medicine of which they get so much use, and the pleasure that they enjoy hearing her tell her never-ending stories of vampires and ghosts). Martina is identified over and over again as "la vieja india" (168, 176, 184, 274) (the old indian woman) and yet the novel questions whether "realmente [era] descendiente de aquella raza desventurada, casi extinguida en esta Isla" (167) (she really [was] a descendent of that unfortunate race, nearly extinguished on this Island) as the ranchers of Cubitas conjecture. But in her preserving these narratives she assumes the role of proprietor for the indigenous community's heritage. Martina performs the part of the *ab-original* mother, holder of native roots as well as both indigenous oral traditions and narrative practices.

The narrative voice in the novel tends to only half-accept Martina's indigenous "lineage," transmitting certain distrust to the reader: "este color [de su rostro], empero, era todo lo que podía alegar a favor de sus pretensiones

de india, pues ninguno de los rasgos de su fisonomía parecía corresponder a su pretendido origen” (176) (this color [of her face], nevertheless, was all that they could allege in favor of her indigenous pretensions, since none of the facial features of her physiognomy seemed to correspond to her claimed origin). The doubts generated by this question of her racial identity confirm Martina’s otherness (she claims to be what her own body, according to the narrative voice, does not substantiate) as well as an otherness within the world of the novel. Because of the opacity of her identity, she remains outside the networks of racial sociability established by the main plotline: the commercial and love triangles between the mulatto slave, the white Creoles and the European foreigner. An outsider to the dominant social circuits, Martina is further distinguished not only for “sus puntos de loca” (167) (her crazy points), but also for being racially illegible, for being neither white nor black, nor mixed like Sab. In nineteenth-century Cuba, as noted by historian Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, colonial power was maintained by the racial opposition between black slave and his white master: “the division between white and nonwhite was . . . jealously guarded by the colonial state and the white elite” (8). The fact that Martina neither fits within this racial binary, nor within its permutations, underscores the displaced quality of her racial identity. And yet her character is configured as wholly representative of an indigeneity that is also not entirely legible. Her claim to these supposed native roots, however, is undeniably troubling.

We meet Martina halfway through the novel through a digressive pause in the primary narrative when the protagonists (the Creole family and English visitors) travel to Cubitas, a small town in the Camagüey region of the island known for its “famosas cuevas . . . obra admirable de la naturaleza, y dignas de ser visitadas” (128) (famous caves . . . an admirable work of nature, worth of being visited). The scene at the Cubitas cave is framed by an extended introduction of Martina who is portrayed as inhabiting its subterranean space. This episode is crucial to understanding the figure of Martina, the *madre-india* (Indian-mother), as interruptive of the allegorical dimensions of the text. I will thus focus here on a detailed discussion of this passage, noting the peculiarities of its aesthetic composition, with the aim of highlighting the ways in which the novel employs the cave to symbolize the persistence of a discordant memory, a memory of the violent past that the allegorical model wishes to forget.

Early in the episode we are told that “[la india] vive en una pequeña choza, cerca de las cuevas” (170) ([the indian woman] lives in a small hut, near the caves), along the path from the caves, “los viajeros [la] vieron en el umbral de su humilde morada” (176) (the travelers saw [her] in the threshold of her humble abode). Not long after, the caves are characterized as her “asilo” (182) (refuge), making it a space essentially identified with Martina. The caves also provide the setting for the novel’s subplot, the trip to Cubitas from Carlota’s

family's property, the Bellavista plantation. This space is crucial to our reading as it is within the caves where the text unites all of the main characters and, consequently, a unification of all of the allegorized components necessary for the founding of an idealized nation: the Creole landowner and his daughters (the presumed future mothers of the nation—including Carlota in her personification of the nation's lineage of western cultural tradition), the foreign merchant, the mulatto slave (who personifies the African narrative and cultural tradition of Cuba's history), and the native (grand)mother, who bears and transmits aboriginal stories (and History—*Historia e historias*). Cubitas, the little Cuba, is a microcosm of the nation Avellaneda presents and its symbolic value is emphasized in being the country's most interior space. The cave appears as a space simultaneously embedded (subterraneously) in the center of Cuban earth and interpolated in the center of the novel's primary narrative. It is the place where the country's native roots are planted, a symbol of the nation's womb. And although the caves are in the margins of plantation society, they nevertheless occupy a multiple centrality: central geographically in the interior of the island, geologically in the interior of the land, and textually in the center of the book.

Upon entering into the physical space of the caves, an immediate relationship is established between its interior space and an indigenous ancestry. Following the description of the passageways and enclosures of the three main caves through which the characters navigate, the narrator pauses to detail the images drawn on the walls of the cave named María Teresa. There we encounter: "pinturas bizarras designadas en las paredes con tintas de vivísimos e imborrables colores, que aseguran ser obra de los indios, y mil tradiciones maravillosas prestan cierto encanto a aquellos subterráneos desconocidos" (174) (bizarre paintings marked on the walls with inks of vivid and indelible colors, that are certain to be the work of indians, and thousands of marvelous traditions lending a certain charm to those strange underground spaces). The introduction of the hieroglyphs as an indigenous repertoire constructs this cave in such a way as to appear as a space unequivocally belonging to the aboriginal tradition. That tradition is the habitat of Martina, the storytelling mother. Furthermore, the region in which these caves are located is known as Camagüey, the very name of the famous Taíno *cacique* whom Martina claims to be her ancestor. Therein emerges a single chain of signifiers connecting Camagüey/petroglyphs and the cave/Martina/indigenous history.

As they approach the caves, Sab reminds Carlota's father, Don Carlos, that Martina is "madre de uno de sus mayores de Cubitas" (167) (the mother of one of the overseers from Cubitas), and that she cares for all of the ranchers with maternal affection by delighting them with her stories and with "sus conocimientos en medicina de los que sacan tanta utilidad" (167) (her knowledge of medicine of which she makes such good use). The association

formed between Martina and a uterine characterization of the cave itself further elaborates her own motherhood. The narrative voice illustrates the depth of the cave explored by the protagonists in a manner evocative of the female sex: “nadie ha osado todavía penetrar más allá de la undécima sala. Se dice, empero, vulgarmente que un río de sangre demarca su término visible, y que los abismos que le siguen son las enormes bocas del infierno” (174) (no one has yet dared to penetrate beyond the eleventh room. It is commonly said, however vulgarly, that a river of blood marks its visible limit, and that the abyss that follows it is the enormous mouths of Hell). The cave is a space inscribed with the violence of a “río de sangre” (174) (river of blood); it is a “reducido y tenebroso recinto” (174) (small and gloomy enclosure) marked by a fear of ending up suffocated “por el calor excesivo que hay en ella” (174) (by the excessive heat within it). The image of menstrual blood signaling the act of deep penetration emphasizes the cave’s maternity and fertility. The cave, moreover, dazzles the traveler that “ve brillar sobre su cabeza un rico dosel de plata sembrado de zafiros y brillantes, que tal parece en la oscuridad de la gruta el techo singular que la cubre” (174) (sees shining above his head a rich silver canopy sown with sapphires and diamonds, such that appears in the darkness of the cave the special ceiling that covers it). Upon penetration, the cave gives light and life (*da luz, y da a luz*). In this regard, the maternal cave refigures the original colonial violation of the Conquest and its violent penetration in search of precious metals, and consequently, restages the birth of a new historical period founded in the destruction of indigenous culture (with its “mil tradiciones maravillosas”).

In penetrating the Cuban earth, the foreigner Enrique and the Creole family are rewarded by “el placer de admirar las bellezas que contiene” (174) (the pleasure of admiring the beauty contained within) in seeing that shining, “rico dosel de plata sembrado de zafiros” (174) (rich silver canopy sown with sapphires). This description of the exploration of the cave by white subjects invokes the exploitative violation of the colonial project. By recalling its colonial past (the “penetration” by the *conquistadores*), the characterization of the cave suggests it as both a violent and sexualized female space that in turn records the historical violence of the island: the cracks, the “imborrables [dibujos] de los indios” (174–175) (indelible [drawings] of the indians) inscribed in the walls of the cave, document traces of a petrified memory of oppression. In the Cubitas cave episode, the encounter with such memories of native origins (the indigenous peoples’ history, the Conquest) is presented as a violent and infernal journey through a subterranean space, through a metaphorical womb of Mother Earth (or the *motherland*), and symbolizes the archive of ancestral history and memory—all of which are images deeply associated with Martina.

It will be worthwhile to underline here the irreducible connection between the functions of femininity and maternity and of the reproduction of

knowledge and transmission of memory, a connection reaffirmed by the vast literary tradition that has associated the metaphorical field of the cave with the mother's uterus. Florence M. Weinberg, for example, explains that the cave has been seen "primarily as nature's sheltering womb" (3). In reading the Cubitas caves as a womb-shelter, Martina's motherhood is visually manifested as a receptacle concurrently for the forgetting and memorializing of Cuba's foundational violence. The cave's archival and fertile functions elicit the theoretical notion of *chora* (or *khora*); the paradoxes of *chora* echo the paradoxes of Martina's character. Introduced by Plato's *Timaeus* as a kind of receptacle to be written upon, *chora* has since been recognized for its/her reproductive quality. Elizabeth Grosz and Julia Kristeva have theoretically synthesized the equivalence between the feminine-maternal symbolization and the transmission of knowledge in the concept of *chora*. While not a concrete place, *chora* evokes notions of space—region, country, setting—and of femininity by being associated with sexually codified terms. Grosz explains that *chora*, "follows a long line of deconstructively privileged terms . . . 'writing,' 'trace,' 'pharmakon,' 'dissemination,' 'supplement,' 'parergon' . . . , 'ghost,' 'remainder,' 'residue'" linking the semiotics of motherhood to the reproduction of knowledge and memory, and to the recuperation and dissemination of history (112). Grosz likewise affirms that words like "'mother,' 'nurse,' 'receptacle,' and 'imprint-bearer'" are associated with *chora*. These terms resonate with the space of the Cubitas caves in the context of *Sab*. The concept of *chora* also serves us in theorizing the important symbolism of the maternal cave that is inscribed with traces of the original indigenous peoples and allows for a rethinking of the figure of Martina as a spectral, maternal narrator.

The reformulation of maternity through the historicized space of the cave is generated in a way quite closely to how Julia Kristeva theorizes the *chora* concept: "nourishing and maternal . . . the mother's body is therefore what mediates the symbolic law organizing social relations and becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*" (36–37). The mediation and abjection of the maternal body, this dichotomy of a uterus constructed as much as a victim of an intrusive penetration as a source of life is, for Kristeva, the dichotomous state characterizing the semiotic *chora*. While Derrida pushed back on the networks of metaphorical interpretations of *chora* as "'mother,' 'nurse,' 'receptacle,' 'imprint-bearer'" for being anachronistic in its reliance on translation, his essay on the concept provides a way to think about the cave to connect such interpretations of space as maternal and generative of history as well as negating that history with the violence that is inscribed upon it. For Derrida, *chora* is "the sum or the process of what has just been inscribed 'on' her" (99). Like a womb that nurtures and produces, like the cave that remembers and transmits stories, Derrida entertains *chora* as a receptacle "if it/she gives place to all the stories, ontologic or mythic, that can be recounted on the

subject of what she receives and even of what she resembles but which in fact takes place in her” (117). His reflection on the problematic oral tradition in *Timaeus* is of interest as “it will not make us forget (since it is written!) that all this is written in that place which *receives* everything” (115). He describes this passage as a “tale about the possibility of the tale, a proposition about origin, memory, and writing” (115).

Within this vision, the notion of the cave is complicated as the mother occupies the place of otherness in the process of signification: “[de]pendence on the mother is severed, and transformed into a symbolic relation to an other . . . In this way, the signifier/signified break is synonymous with social sanction: ‘the first social censorship’” (Kristeva 43).⁵ Despite being a nourishing and maternal womb, *chora*, the cavernous state represented by Martina reproduces the semiotic problematic of an alterity, a social censorship comparable to that of the slave and of the native in nineteenth-century Cuba as represented in *Sab*: “The semiotic chora is no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated” (Kristeva 37). This is essentially what happens with Martina in Cubitas, the little Cuba—feminine diminutive and symbolic microcosm—where we encounter native roots of the country’s past. The cave, geological it may be, is Cuba’s metaphorical womb. And there the uterine cave is simultaneously generating and negating the nation’s indigeneity, and the reproduction of its most painful memories.

The episode in the Cubitas caves presents the subterranean space as a kind of archival womb of the indigenous past. The hieroglyphics on the cave walls capture the visitors’ attention: “una larga hilera de columnas parecen decorar el peristilo de algún palacio subterráneo; allá una hermosa cabeza atrae y fija las miradas: en otra parte se ven infinitas petrificaciones sin formas determinadas, que presentan masas de deslumbrante blancura y figuras raras y caprichosas” (174) (a long row of columns appear to decorate the peristyle of a subterranean palace; there a beautiful head draws in and fixes the gaze: in another part one sees infinite petrifications without specific form, that present masses of dazzling white and strange, capricious figures). These images are symbols *other* to the travelers’ comprehension, however, difficult to interpret as codes belonging to a cultural tradition already half-erased and forgotten. But the cave preserves an indigenous history, as discussed above, with those “pinturas bizarras designadas en las paredes con tintas de vivísimos e imborrables colores, que aseguran ser obra de los indios, y mil tradiciones maravillosas prestan cierto encanto a aquellos subterráneos desconocidos” (174) (bizarre paintings marked on the walls with inks of vivid and indelible colors, that are certain to be the work of indians, and thousands of marvelous traditions lending a certain charm to those strange underground spaces). Exhibited on those interior walls is a work admired by “muchos viajeros [que] han visitado con curiosidad e interés” (173) (many travelers [that] have visited with

curiosity and interest) that makes the space as much an archive of the indigenous people as a catalogue of its past admirers: “las paredes estaban llenas con los nombres de los visitantes de las grutas” (175) (the walls were filled with the names of visitors to the caves). The hieroglyphics introduce the characters to a kind of archeological museum. Visible on the walls is a written archive of the nation’s past, turning the cave into a space that symbolically recounts the history of the origins of the Cuban nation and its peoples. The walls of the cave therein serve as a system of writing, transmitting the knowledge of that past.

Given the relationship established in the novel between Martina and the cave, the illustration of the cave as an archive indicates that the Indian woman’s body itself also incorporates an archival dimension. The novel makes this explicit in the physical description of her character. In Martina’s face, we are told that “las arrugas . . . surcaban en todas direcciones” (176) (the wrinkles . . . plowed through in all directions) similarly to how the water filtered into the cave “por innumerables e imperceptibles grietas, [y que] ha formado bellísimas figuras al petrificarse” (174) (through innumerable and imperceptible cracks, [and that] had formed beautiful figures upon petrification). The mirrored relationship drawn between Martina’s face and the walls of the Cubitas cave suggests that the indigenous woman embodies the physical space whose walls exhibit the “obra de los indios” (174) (work of the indians). The parallelism between her body and the cave is made even more striking given the “blancura y belleza” (174) (whiteness and beauty) of “las piedras admirables de que aquellas grutas [que] se hallan entapizadas” (174) (the remarkable rocks of those caves [that] cover the walls) that echo the “lustre y blancura” (176) (luster and whiteness) of the bald part of Martina’s head, as well as the “blanco vidriado” (176) (glazed white) of her eyes. The characterizations of these structures—of the cave and of Martina—are marked by the striking glow and strange attraction of the figures inscribed in their surfaces in having survived the fossilization of time. Martina forms part of this written (and drawn) tradition, and her body itself becomes the scriptural vehicle for the transmission of indigenous Cuban culture.

The memory of violence committed against the Taíno people, sparked by the cave hieroglyphs, is narrated orally primarily by Martina in the legend of the *cacique* tortured and murdered by Spaniards, who is then said to appear recurrently in the form of the curious light in Cubitas’s night sky. The oral quality of her character expresses what the silent hieroglyphs can only trace. The legends orally transmitted by Martina move parallel to the drawings inscribed in the cave walls, those that, by the metaphorical mirroring described above, are also associated with the wrinkles of her own face, the grooves in her body. Martina’s voice-body archive serves the conservation of native origins of both oral and written traditions. However, as the transmitting mother, Martina does not allow an allegorical restitution of the nation; the memory that she invokes

is a memory disabling the allegory's ecumenical fictions.

Such disabling caused by the transmission of legends originated by Martina (legends unassociated with an idyllic, inclusive memory) is evidenced in the passage in which Sab, on the way to the Cubitas cave, retells a story that he has repeatedly heard from the old *india*: the legend of the death of the *cacique* Camagüey. Martina is absent at the moment when Sab narrates the legend, a story that has become inscribed now legendarily in the celestial phenomenon “[a]rrebatada . . . por este furor de venganza, delira[ndo] de un modo espantoso y osa[ando] pronunciar terribles vaticinios” (168) (enraptured . . . by this furor of vengeance, rave[ing] in a frightening way and dare[ing] to pronounce dreadful prophecies). By way of Sab, however, Martina appears as the source of the oral transmission of that terrifying past and of the ominous predictions that accompany that legend.

It is following a question posed by Carlota's father that Sab begins retelling this legend. Approaching Cubitas, Don Carlos marvels at the “luz vacilante y pálida que oscilaba a lo lejos” (106) (pale and flickering light that oscillated in the distance) and becomes interested to learn about the local conjectures related to the phenomenon. Don Carlos asks Sab if he had heard any explanations with respect to this light.⁶ Don Carlos's curiosity prompts his slave to share the legend repeatedly told to him by Martina, whom the town believes to be a descendant of Camagüey, the *cacique* that, as we are told, was “tratado indignamente por los advenedizos [españoles], a quienes acogiera con generosa y franca hospitalidad, [y que fuera] arrojado de la cumbre de esa gran loma y su cuerpo despedazado [quedara] insepulto sobre la tierra regada con su sangre” (168) (treated contemptibly by the foreigners [Spaniards], who were welcomed with generous and honest hospitality, [and that was] thrown from the peak of that big hill and his dismembered body [would remain] unburied upon the earth that was bathed in his blood). Sab explains that, according to Martina's account, the nocturnal apparition of the light is actually the “alma del desventurado cacique [que] viene todas la noches a la loma fatal, en forma de luz, a anunciar a los descendientes de sus bárbaros asesinos la venganza del cielo que tarde o temprano caerá sobre ellos” (168) (soul of the unfortunate chief [that] comes every night to that fatal hill, in the form of the light, to announce to the descendants of his barbaric murders the vengeance of the heavens that sooner or later will fall upon them). But the story does not end there. Immediately thereafter, Sab adds that, as narrated by Martina, “los hombres negros serán los terribles vengadores de los hombres cobrizos” (168) (the black man shall be the dreadful avenger of the redman), reminding his master of the violence that occurred on their “isla vecina” (168) (neighboring island) of Haiti. In the middle of Sab's recounting, Don Carlos, “con cierto disgusto” (with certain disgust), interrupts his slave by silencing him: “Basta, Sab, Basta” (168) (Enough, Sab, enough), horrified to hear of the

ever-possible uprising “en la boca de un hombre del desgraciado color” (168) (from the mouth of a man of disgraced color).

The counterpart of Don Carlos’s alarmed reaction to Sab’s tale is the insensitive reaction of his daughter, Carlota. After hearing the legend, Carlota begins to cry and laments the tragic fate of the island’s indigenous people, “al recordar una raza desventurada que habitó la tierra que habitamos, que vio por primera vez el mismo sol que alumbró nuestra cuna, y que ha desaparecido de esta tierra de la que fue pacífica poseedora. Aquí vivían felices e inocentes aquellos hijos de la naturaleza” (169) (upon remembering an ill-fated race that inhabited the land that we now inhabit, that saw for the first time the same sun that illuminated our cradle, and that has disappeared from this land of which it was a most peaceful possessor. Here they lived happy and innocent those children of nature). Meditating over the “escondidos tesoros” (169) (hidden treasures) of the “suelo virgen” (169) (virgin soil) enjoyed by Indians, Carlota exclaims: “¡Oh, Enrique! Lloro no haber nacido entonces y que tú, indio como yo, me hicieses una cabaña de palmas en donde gozásemos una vida de amor, de inocencia y de libertad” (169) (Oh, Enrique! I weep for not having been born back then and that you, indian like me, would have made me a hut of palms in which we would have enjoyed a life of love, innocence and freedom).⁷ This melodramatic lament not only solidifies Carlota’s romantic insensibility, but also signals a common forgetting among the island’s new inhabitants, the white Creoles, and their blindness to the violence toward, and suffering of, the present slave populations. Carlota demonstrates such blindness in the face of potential future violence expressed in Martina’s warnings retold by her adopted mulatto son; she remains oblivious to the slaves’ capability to disable Cuba’s Creole future.⁸ By virtue of the oral tradition, the transmission of the legend of Camagüey—together with the prediction of a vengeful violence—dramatizes the impossibility of forgetting the nation’s brutal origins and potentialities that the text insistently associates with its contemporary conditions of slavery. As the native narrator, Martina displays the persistence of Cuba’s violent past, its continuity in orally transmitted memories, and the threatening shadow it hangs over the nation’s future.⁹

Related to the oral tradition, we also find a semi-oneiric discourse surrounding the figure of Martina. Characteristic of the romantic aesthetic, this discourse is important in the construction of her character as interruptive of the ecumenical allegory and its kinship structures. Analogous to the legends that she recounts about Camagüey, toward the end of the novel after Sab and Martina have both died, rumors in Cubitas circulate about strange nocturnal happenings: it is said that after her death, the old woman returned to visit the grave of her adopted son. According to “los observadores de la visitadora nocturna” (274) (the observers of the nocturnal visitor) it was the spirit of the departed old woman; the text does not make it entirely clear if this “visión

misteriosa" (274) (mysterious vision) is a product of a collective delusion or a fact of reality. The novel suggests, however, that the figure was neither old nor indian-looking, but rather a "joven, blanca y hermosa cuanto podía conjeturarse, pues siempre tenía cubierto el rostro con una gasa" (274) (young, white, and beautiful woman, inasmuch as one could surmise, since she always had her face covered with a face covering), resembling Carlota more than Martina, giving the impression that in the end, both characters (Sab's beloved as well as his *madre india*) have been cast into the same spectral figure, there facing the slave's tomb.

This spectral dimension intensifies the uncertainty that characterizes the figure of Martina. Made "ghost-like," she seems to occupy a place outside of her own body, echoing those stories she tells about "vampiros y aparecidos" (167) (vampires and ghosts). The description of her physical condition is noteworthy for the townspeople could see Martina, even after her death, kneeling in front of Sab's grave at the same time she would pay her respects while she was still alive (Sab died before she did): "Este rumor encontró fácil acceso, pues siempre se había creído en Cubitas que Martina no era una criatura como las demás" (274) (This rumor found easy acceptance, since it had always been believed in Cubitas that Martina was a creature unlike any other). The spectral image of Martina reminds us of that famous light she describes in one of her legends as the supposed indication of the "alma del desventurado cacique [que] viene todas las noches a la loma fatal, en forma de luz" (168) (soul of the unfortunate chief [that] comes every night to that fatal hill, in the form of the light). Through such associations and confusion caused by this enigmatic figure, a double parallel is suggested in this passage: the substitution of Martina for Carlota (or their merging into a single figure) runs parallel to the identity of the supposed *india* (indian) with the equally spectral figure of Camagüey. The chain of signifiers that emerge from this parallelism establishes the following peculiar relationships: Martina/Carlota, Martina/Camagüey, Carlota/Camagüey.

This double phantasmagorical image—the interchangeability between Martina and Carlota, split threefold by Camagüey—is even more disturbing when considering the questions of kinship, and the transmission of memories, that she disrupts. In representing a symbolic identification between Martina and Carlota, the mirroring between the *criolla* and the *india*, disturbs the mother-son relationship that occurred between Martina and Sab, superimposing the figure of unrequited love encoded on Carlota onto the figure of the indigenous mother. This transfiguration of the adoptive mother into the object of desire for the slave marks another form of spectral and highly perverse familial union, symbolically haunted by the shadow of incest.¹⁰

As already mentioned, the novel effectively asserts a filial relationship between Sab and Martina. Albeit by the book's end, Carlota comes to refor-

mulate this family nucleus in her convergence with Martina during the latter's profession of mourning (once she is already dead) and as such, solidifying a spiritual union with her. But this is not just a sentimental attachment. As Evelyn Picon Garfield has observed, Carlota symbolically becomes a "receptáculo" of culture and of tradition through an identitary association with Martina's ghost in front of Sab's grave:

sombra indígena, escritura mulata, y por fin, peregrina blanca, receptáculo vivo de la realidad cubana. Al tejer los hilos periféricos del subalterno colonial, Gómez de Avellaneda sella un pacto entre los seres invisibles de la sociedad de la Isla quienes cumplen la función de rescatar de la cultura cubana la esencia de su faz sincrética y heterogénea, ignorada por la metrópoli. (79–80)

(indigenous shadow, mulatto writing, and finally, white pilgrim, living receptacle of Cuban reality. By weaving together the marginal strands of the colonial subaltern, Gómez de Avellaneda seals a pact between the invisible beings of the Island society that fulfill the role of rescuing from Cuban culture the essence of its syncretic and heterogeneous face, ignored by the metropolis.)

Picon Garfield sustains that Carlota has internalized Martina's sacrifice and "de ese modo Carlota llega a ser el receptáculo destinado a recordar la experiencia subalterna colonial frente al materialismo y mercantilismo de la creciente crisis del siglo de la modernidad" (81) (in this way Carlota becomes the receptacle destined to remember the subaltern colonial experience in the face of the materialism and mercantilism of the growing crisis of the modern century).¹¹ Thus the transmission of indigenous culture is seen in a physical and spiritual rebirth, together with the narrative transmission of the already mentioned legend of Camagüey. Important to the interpretation of the indigenous figure as one that is metaphorically stabilizing is what Picon Garfield poses as that "pacto entre los seres invisibles de la sociedad de la Isla" (80) (pact between the invisible beings of the Island society). The national family unit is not one that is united materially but rather in spirit, and therein opens up the possibility for symbolic-transcultural resolution. What Picon Garfield does not say, however, is that the memory transmitted and assumed by Carlota is none other than that of disgrace and intercultural discord, the now spectral disabling of an ecumenical narrative for the future nation.

Martina is the only maternal figure in a novel full of motherless orphans. Kelly Comfort has suggested that she functions symbolically as the future mother of the nation. But contrary to this thesis, I contend that Martina complicates the discourse on historical roots in the formation of the nation sym-

bolized as such, as well as the kinship discourse that accompanies it. Indeed, in the novel Martina and Sab repeatedly affirm the mother-son relationship that they themselves have freely chosen (a non-biological filiation). Martina identifies Sab as her “único hijo” (244) (only child) and again announces this affective bond by wallowing in grief during the last moments of Sab’s life: “hijo mío . . . ven, hijo mío, que yo te oiga, que oiga tu voz, que vea tus facciones, que sienta latir tu corazón junto al mío. ¡Oh, Sab!, piensa que ya nada me queda en el mundo sino tú . . . que eres mi único hijo, el único apoyo de esta larga y destrozada existencia” (243–244) (my son . . . come, my son, let me hear you, let me hear your voice, see your features, feel your heartbeat next to mine. Oh, Sab! To think that nothing is left for me in this world without you . . . that you are my only child, my only support in this long and devastated existence). This adoptive, non-genealogical relationship produces an indigenous maternity that is only made possible outside of traditional family networks, not within a multicultural, heteronormative-protonational family. The familial bond formed between Sab and Martina produces ties that the heterosexual romantic unions, so dear to the allegorical discourse of the nation, fail to establish. The Sab-Martina nucleus, perverse and semi-incestuous for the eventual fusion of Martina and Carlota, remains free of biologisms.

This affective filial dimension is structured in the novel by an equally powerful narrative dimension. Sab is the son that gives continuity to the old Indian woman’s stories, repeating the ominous legend of Camagüey. Picon Garfield has asserted that this relay of voices signals the unification of races represented by Sab and Martina:

como testigo-relator, Sab se distancia de su enunciado subversivo, y para mayor seguridad, lo encuadra dentro del marco del relator originario, la arrebatada, y delirante vieja Martina. No obstante, las palabras violentas de la india en boca del mulato patentizan la solidaridad entre las razas de color, una solidaridad inexistente en otras novelas cubanas. (63–64)¹²

(as witness-storyteller, Sab distances himself from his declared subversion, and, for greater security, he frames it within the mark of the original storyteller, the aggressive and outrageous old woman, Martina. Nevertheless, the violent words of the indian woman in the mouth of the mulatto make evident the solidarity between the races, a solidarity that is non-existent in other Cuban novels.)

For Picon Garfield, the fusion of voices, or ventriloquism on the part of the Indian mother, establishes a solidarity between the native and the slave. The fear provoked by Martina’s predictions (and then repeated by her “son”), however, cannot but disturb the harmony imagined in the allegorical models

studied by Sommer and Comfort. This is a moment of contact that reveals much more than a relationship of solidarity or familial affiliation between the mulatto slave and an old indigenous woman. That *Sab* is a vehicle to retransmit the story of Camagüey narrated by Martina complicates the novel's only maternal relationship as well as the ecumenical and protonational allegory suggested by critics. To some extent, this transmission dismisses Martina from her function as symbolic mother of a future nation—free of conflicts, fissures or cracks—by virtue of the bonds of love, turning her into the maternal voice of an atrocious and discordant memory, in the relay of the enslaved son's voice, a foreshadower prefiguring a future threat of violence.

Indigenous figure, storyteller of past violence and future threats, mother to the new Cuban nation, as restorative as she is disturbing: Martina is at once both illegible and revealing. In order for the novel to unequivocally propose a political-literary project of cultural restitution and reconciliation, it would need to forget the violence central to the nation's origins, a violence inscribed in Martina's body-archive. Reading the Cubitas cave, a space belonging to Martina as well as a generator of particularly meaningful symbolism, as an archive of the violence suffered by slaves and indigenous people, is to recognize a geological-geographic space memorializing that violence forever inscribed in the earth-body of the Cuban nation, in the body of the indigenous mother, and in the pages of the novel. It is an indelible and threatening memory, destabilizing to the national allegory and to its community desires: a memory of the foundational violence of the Cuban nation.

Notes

1. Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, *Sab*. Cátedra, 1997. Citations hereafter will refer to pages from this edition.
2. I am referring to the chapter "Sab C'est Moi," from the book *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*, and to the article of the same title published in *Hispanamérica*.
3. "Ecumenical" here and throughout is used in the etymological sense of the word. The concept of ecumenism, a term derived from the Greek word for house or household (*oikos*), etymologically makes specific reference to a longing for universal unity.
4. Evelyn Picon Garfield similarly posits this question of the racially idealized proto-nation, imagined in *Sab* as the "utópico e igualitario" (utopic and egalitarian) subtext of the novel. Picon Garfield observes that through the relationship between the mulatto slave and the white woman, Avellaneda recognizes "la miscegenación en la Isla" (the

miscegenation of the Island), and thereby asserts “la solidaridad entre los oprimidos” (66) (solidarity among the oppressed). Picon Garfield likewise reads a unifying vision in the novel’s harmonious union of races.

5. Derrida insists upon *chora*’s unintelligibility and remarks on her/its otherness or ‘apartness’: “*Khora* marks a place apart . . . this strange mother who gives place without engendering can no longer be considered as an origin” (124). The “strange mother” that “engenders nothing” and possesses nothing, not even children (105) reminds us of Martina’s adoption of Sab. Her otherness, her position apart from the racial binaries, love triangles, economic exchanges, and family units, is constitutive to her character and to the reading proposed in this essay. *Chora* presents a framework to think about the figures of both the cave and Martina symbolically as generative receptacles of oral and imprinted history, as well as their positions as “outsiders” beyond the family and racial paradigms structuring the allegorical interpretation of the novel. And with regard to this claim that *chora* is not an origin but rather a pre-origin requiring a “threatened, bastard, hybrid” discourse is remarkably similar to the discourse presented in the Cubitas cave. Interpretive clarity, for Derrida, comes by “going back behind and below the origin, or also the birth” (125). Such a regression curiously reflects the narrative and historical movement “back behind and below” into Martina and her caves.
6. Avellaneda elaborates on the cultural and narrative significance of the phenomenon of this light in a footnote with supplemental information relevant for reference here: “Los cubiteros han forjado en otros tiempos extraños cuentos relativos a una luz que decían aparecer todas las noches en aquel paraje, y que era visible para todos los que transitaban por el camino de la ciudad de Puerto Príncipe y Cubitas . . . cuyas causas jamás han sido satisfactoriamente explicadas. Un sujeto . . . dice que eran fuegos fatuos, que la ignorancia calificó de aparición sobrenatural . . . que las quemazones que se hacen todos los años en los campos pueden haber consumido las materias que producían el fenómeno. Sin paramos a examinar si es o no fundada esta conjetura, y dejando a nuestros lectores la libertad de formar juicios más exactos, adoptamos por ahora la opinión de los cubiteros, y explicaremos el fenómeno, en la continuación de la historia, tal cual nos ha sido referido y explicado” (166–167) (The people of Cubitas have concocted strange tales concerning a light that they said appeared every night in that spot, and that it was visible for all that travelled by way of the city of Puerto Príncipe to Cubitas . . . whose causes have never been satisfactorily explained. One individual . . . says that they were fleeting spook lights, that ignorance called it a supernatural apparition . . . that the bonfires that are made every year in the fields may have consumed the substances that produced the phenomenon. Without stopping to examine if this conjecture is or is not well founded, and allowing our readers the freedom to form more exact judgments, we will adopt for the time being the *Cubiteros*’s opinion, and we shall explain the phenomenon, in the continuation of the story, just as it has been recounted and explained to us.) The transmission of folklore is highlighted even more with this intervention in the oral tradition by the author herself. Avellaneda privileges

local beliefs, despite raising doubt in the minds of readers by referring to their “libertad de formar juicios más exactos” (freedom to form more exact judgments). In this way Martina participates in the formation and continuation of the myth of the Cubitas light, in the construction and preservation of the legendary archive of Cuban oral history.

7. Carlota’s imagined idyllic pre-Columbian past calls to mind important critical interpretations of *Sab*’s nationalistic discourse beyond that with which this essay is occupied, namely scholarship placing the novel within the intellectual tradition of Cuban creole reformism and the aesthetic movement of *siboneyismo*. José Gomariz has suggested reading Carlota’s romanticized exaltation of the “hombre natural” (native man) and “la memoria cultural indígena” (indigenous cultural memory) present in the novel as comparable to José Fornaris, a founder of the *siboneyista* movement, and his *Cantos del Siboney*. Characterized by Cintio Vitier as “la falsedad romántica importada” (imported romantic falsehood) leading to “una especie de auto-exotismo imperdonable; de la otra, la naturaleza híbrida de una visión que quería ser a la vez poética y política” (a kind of inexcusable auto-exotism; of the other, the hybrid nature of a vision that wanted to be at once poetic and political), the effort to paint the “antigua bucólica” (bucolic old-fashioned) of the “antiguos habitantes de Cuba” (former inhabitants of Cuba) was a way to express patriotism using the native as a symbol for other oppressed Cubans (158–159). And referring to what Moreno Friginals defined as “una especie de indigenismo sin indígenas, expresando una nostalgia romántica por una imaginaria Arcadia india destruida por los conquistadores españoles” (192) (a form of Indigenism without indigenous peoples, expressing a romantic nostalgia for an imaginary indigenous Arcadia destroyed by the Spanish conquistadors), Gomariz’s argument further illuminates the symbolic weight placed on the figure of Martina. And while the *siboneyista* discourse is not the primary question interrogated here, the *india*’s (indian’s) pretensions of her indigenous heritage both insists upon remembering the violent destruction of her ancestors as well as suggests a resistance to the kind of racial homogenization (or whitening) driving Creole reformers like Domingo del Monte.
8. Unlike other Latin American historical narratives, in *Sab* the Spanish conquistador’s offence against the native peoples is not projected onto the white Creole colonial political situation, but onto the socioeconomic exploitation of their slaves. In the novel, slaves are to Creoles what indigenous peoples were to Spaniards.
9. The memory of this violence produces a kind of dissonance reminiscent of that which was asserted by Ernst Renan in his now classic essay “What is a Nation?” regarding the origin of modern political formation requiring the forging of a common memory that suppresses “the deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations,” while “unity is always effected by means of brutality” (11). In *Sab*, it is Martina who highlights such initial suffering that Renan considers dangerous to the forging of a common national memory founded on other more ecumenical sacrifices linked to the worship of ancestors.
10. Although the novel insinuates that Sab and Carlota are cousins, their relationship would not be, according to Sommer “the unproductive dead-end of love.” Rather, the

potential cousins' intimacy "might have provided an ideal family consolidation in the nation building project" (*Fictions* 135). The fact that Carlota never ends up having any children voids that potential consolidation, as she was to symbolize the national mother within the interpretive framework of the allegory. The barren white woman's symbolic convergence with the indigenous mother is consistent with the notion of interruptions in the national Creole discourse pursued in this essay. The incest suggested in the mother-Martina's substitution by the object-of-desire-Carlota cancels any sort of reproduction that could be desirable from such union.

11. Also reading in an ecumenical-allegorical register, Steven Skattebo has interpreted these final scenes in the novel as a spiritual union between characters that can represent racial *mestizaje* in Cuba.
12. The expression of this "profética visión de la historia de Cuba" (prophetic vision of Cuban history), according to Adriana Méndez Rodenas, marks a continuity between Cuba's indigenous peoples and slaves. The fact that it is Sab who articulates this vision echoes Avellaneda's vision of the "rescate de la presencia indígena, sistemáticamente anulada por la conquista. El sustrato indígena se verifica en *Sab* a través de la anciana Martina, madre emblemática y cobriza" (22–23) (recovery of the indigenous presence, systematically destroyed by the Conquest. The indigenous substrata is validated in *Sab* through the elderly Martina, the emblematic and copper-colored mother). Sab and Martina are not united simply by a family bond, but also by their shared hi/stories (and origins) of violent erasures.

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